



Peer-Reviewed paper

## **Emotional, social and relationship development for gifted and talented children in early childhood education**

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The emotional, social and relationship development of gifted children within the early childhood years is not simplistic, nor homogenous. The domain of gifted research is fractured, which affects the consideration of gifted children's emotional development and subsequent social and relationship development. This paper considers and critiques two groups of theories, both of which assert gifted children's emotional development is advanced but diverge on the effect this advanced development has upon the gifted child's social and relationship development. The varying impacts of these discursive images of gifted children are problematised, as is the effects of neoliberal discourses and developmental discourses upon the emotional, social and relational development of gifted children. Following on from this critique, recommendations for pedagogical practice are expounded.

### ***Introduction***

When discussing developmental trajectories for any group of individuals there is a temptation to generalise and simplify. It would be appealing to classify gifted children into a single homogenous group in order to discuss a cohesive interpretation of their emotional, social and relationship development. Indeed the search for unifying theories is central to positivist approaches to science, the tradition of research which heavily informs many conceptions of giftedness (Cohen, 2012). However, this paper will argue that it is important to draw attention to the multiplicity within the field of gifted education theory. Giftedness is a multifaceted phenomenon. Current gifted education literature within Aotearoa/New Zealand express the complexity in comprehending and defining this phenomenon (Margrain, Murphy, & Dean, 2015; R. Moltzen, 2011b). Subsequently, definitions, concepts and/or theories of the emotional, social and relationship development of gifted and talented children are often constructed within a research paradigm which seeks to consolidate experiences into general trends and themes. Yet contemporary early childhood pedagogy is suspicious of generalising theories. Out of respect for those who have disrupted dominant discourses and reenergised the early childhood educational domain (Cannella, 1997; Farquhar, 2010; May, 2001), this article will seek not only to outline but to problematise some general theories of emotional, social and relationship development for gifted children.

To begin, theories of emotional development for gifted children will be summarised and subsequently critiqued. Following this critique, the article will discuss the impacts theories of gifted children's emotional development have



upon the gifted child's social and relationship development. Finally, the problems that are raised when viewing young gifted children in light of these theories are discussed, and an attempt is made to understand the impact these discursive images can have upon pedagogical practice.

### ***Emotional development for gifted and talented children***

For gifted children, emotions and intelligence are intertwined within a delicate intricate relationship. Investigating the interplay between intelligence and emotions in very young children, Greenspan and Lewis (2009) claim: "new observations suggest that emotional interactions play a far more critical role in intellectual functioning" (p. 9). Even if a concept of giftedness is based primarily upon the intelligence of the individual, increasing evidence pointing to the dependency of intelligence upon emotions denotes attention to be duly paid to emotional development as a foundation for intelligence.

Building further upon the connection between emotions and intellectual functioning, Forrester and Albrecht (2014) stress the importance of the role of the educator in building positive relationships with children in order to aid children's development of emotional regulation, asserting "if children can't manage their emotions, they may struggle to access the skills they have learned" (p. 103). This claim is reinforced by the findings of the recent longitudinal study conducted in Dunedin, which found that children who were less likely to contain their emotions at a young age were more likely to have social and relationship problems later in life (Moffitt et al., 2011). The question of relevance to the focus of this paper is: what does this mean for gifted children?

In order to investigate the application of these views of emotional development, it is necessary to investigate how gifted children's emotional development is considered within gifted education research. In this domain, emotional development for gifted children is considered to be clustered into three major groups (Porter, 1999). Firstly, gifted children are qualitatively different and their emotional differences leave these children emotionally vulnerable. Secondly, gifted children are qualitatively different, but gifted children are advantaged by this emotional difference. Thirdly, there is no qualitative difference between gifted children and other children. In this article, prominence will be given to the first two conditions and how they influence particular images of the gifted child will be discussed.

Drawing upon the theories of Kazimierz Dabrowski, Daniels and Piechowski (2009b) correlated the gifted child's overexcitabilities with sensitivities. Within this theory, gifted children are viewed to be qualitatively different to other children as gifted children are susceptible to the overwhelming drives of their emotions, towards a positive or negative outcome. The term overexcitabilities refers to the child's innate responses to external stimuli with intensified reactions. The assertion is that for gifted children, life is not experienced in the same way as it is by other children. Gifted children's senses are magnified and the subsequent responses they make to their environment can be magnified as well. Daniels and Piechowski (2009a) contend that "life is experienced in a manner that is deeper, more vivid, and more acutely sensed" (p. 9).



The overexcitabilities are delineated into five distinct areas: the psychomotor which is expressed in speech and physical activity; the sensual which is absorbed through the senses; the intellectual which is expressed through curiosity and concentration; the imaginal which is expressed through imaginative image, metaphor and creativity; and the emotional which is expressed through strong manifestations of emotions. Each of these domains contain positive and negative forms of expression, for example, positive expressions of emotional overexcitability are enthusiastic, ecstatic and euphoric, whereas negative expressions can result in deep depression and suicidal tendencies. For the gifted child, the resultant emotional expressions from each overexcitability are demonstrated through high levels of intensity and energy, and their responses to stimuli “tend to be of a much richer quality because so much more detail, texture, contrast and distinction come into awareness” (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009a, p. 11).

However, these overexcitabilities are also connected to a high level of sensitivity. Silverman (2013) asserts that the intensities with which the gifted child experiences their lives can be coupled with a heightened sensitivity in their responses to foods and sounds and external emotional tension. This intense experience of living life is also seen to be a source of potential vulnerability. When considering the gifted child’s amplified responses to the emotional tension of others, the emotional development of the gifted child is connected to their social and relationship development. Daniels and Piechowski (2009a) express concerns about the societal pressure placed on the gifted child to conform to normative educational experiences and argue that “gifted children should not be pressed to ‘fit in’ ... rather their capacity for intense experiencing is an asset that deserves to be understood and affirmed instead of squashed” (p. 5). As asserted by Forrester and Albrecht (2014) earlier, the guidance of the prime caregivers within the gifted child’s life is of tantamount importance in developing ways and means with which to understand, maintain and regulate the expression of these emotions within the bounds of pro-social expression, and to channel these energies into areas where the gifted child can develop passion and self-satisfaction in their talent expression.

Yet, contentions must be raised against this theory. The question remains: how can the educator discern between the young child’s emotive outbursts and the proposed overexcitabilities? Common discourses of children maintain frequent emotive outbursts to be normal for young children, and as many children undergo intense periods of emotional expression, how are overexcitabilities different from young children’s emotional development? These dominant discursive images of the ‘temperamental toddler’ are constructed through research findings which position very young children as hyper emotive (Cipriano & Stifter, 2010; Garner & Dunsmore, 2011; Neppi et al., 2010; Szabó et al., 2008). Cannella (1997) emphasises the influence developmental theory has upon these research studies, especially in positioning the emotive stage of very young children as normal development. To the contrary, Cannella (1997) contends that “perhaps this difficulty applies to all human behaviour and our attempts to interpret that behaviour, or even in the belief that behaviour reveals the human being.” (p. 56). Cannella forefronts the evaluative gaze which may be rendered upon the child, which is equally if not more significant for the gifted child. One needs to ask the question here, if in promoting a perception of the gifted child as sensitive and vulnerable, are we seeing the child or looking for the condition?



Another argument raised against the consideration of gifted children as emotionally vulnerable is the lack of sufficient evidence to make this claim. Freeman (2001) raised this contention against those that seek to associate negative emotional responses and giftedness. Ten years later, N. L. Moltzen (2011) also argued, “while much has been claimed ... too often there has been little science accompanying these assertions” (p. 198). Porter (1999) writes that the instances of emotional disturbance within the gifted population is on par with that of the rest of the population at around 10%; however, despite the lack of evidence, or even evidence proving to the contrary, discursive images of the mentally disturbed gifted individual permeate society. While these images are often employed as a dramatic trope, representing a troubled or maladjusted genius, they impact upon gifted individuals through their discursive pervasiveness (Delaune & Tapper, 2015).

Furthermore, there are concerns with the positioning of children as vulnerable when being seen as having overexcitabilities and sensitivities. If the ways in which children are viewed by society limit the experiences and ways of being available to them (Duncan, 2010), then it is the point between discursive images of the child and giftedness that affect gifted children’s lives. In assuming the vulnerability of the child, the child’s agency is displaced. In viewing the child as being subject to their emotions, the child is compartmentalised and pathologised into a potential negative spiral of self-fulfilment (Moltzen, 2011a), and their emotional expression is seen as a crisis to be controlled.

In line with Forrester and Albrecht (2014) and Greenspan and Lewis (2009), Clark (2008) contends that “events and experiences with emotional intensity are most easily remembered” (p. 126). Aspects of emotional development are correlated to intellectual development and the functioning of memory and information retention. However, in contrast with Daniels and Piechowski (2009b), who see the connection between heightened emotion and intelligence as a detriment, Clark asserts that gifted children are advantaged by this emotional difference. Drawing upon Goleman’s (1997) theories of emotional intelligence, Clark (2008) claims that “gifted children tend to experience easier social-emotional adjustment than do children in the more typical population” (p. 127) due to their abilities to utilise their higher capacity for critical thinking to solve emotional and social problems more efficiently.

The capacity for gifted children to navigate solutions to emotional and social problems within their lives can be connected to the capabilities within the theory of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1997). Where the overexcitabilities theory contained possibilities for positive and negative expression, emotional intelligence capabilities are inherently positive, promoting and projecting a confident, constructive and optimistic view of gifted children. Mayer, Perkins, Caruso, and Salovey (2001) assert that “individuals high in emotional intelligence have the ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions, on the one hand, and to allow emotions to facilitate their thought, on the other” (p. 132). When applied to gifted children, the capabilities of emotional intelligence are considered to be important to guide understanding and pedagogy. These capabilities include “the ability to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations, control impulses and delay gratification, regulate one’s moods and keep distress from overwhelming the ability to think, empathise with others, and hope” (Clark, 2012, p. 94). When positioned within this framework, and drawing upon various research into gifted children’s capabilities (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Olszewski-Kubilius,



Kulieke, & Krasney, 1988), Clark (2012) proposes that gifted children have more emotional-regulation and a more well defined internal locus of control.

Although this perspective appears to be a more positive construction of the gifted child's emotional development, there are problems with the consideration of these capacities in relation to the resultant behaviour. While gifted children may have a higher capacity to excel in these capabilities (persistence, emotive control, quelling distress, empathy), this does not mean they will be compelled to demonstrate these abilities. Freeman (2001) asserts that, while many gifted children may say they are empathetic towards others, "understanding is not the same as social behaviour; and there can be a difference" (p. 142). This is where the role of the educator is necessary to aid the gifted child to develop this empathy into effective pro-social strategies.

Whether gifted children are considered to be emotionally vulnerable or advantaged due to their advanced capacity for emotional development, the interworking between emotional development and social and relationship development should be considered. Of particular concern is the relationship between emotive development and emotional expression, and how this effects their social and relational development. The following section will explore this connection further.

### ***Social and relationship development for gifted and talented children***

As outlined previously, emotional development and regulation affects ongoing relationships with others (Moffitt et al., 2011). In this paper, the trajectory of emotional development in gifted children has been argued to be considered either towards confidence or anxiety. However, gifted children's moral development appears to be less contentious within the field of gifted education research. With regards to the ethical and moral consideration of issues and disputes, a higher proportion of gifted children appear highly sensitive and principled (Clark, 2012; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Jacobsen, 2009; Porter, 1999). In an investigation into moral development of gifted children and family dynamics, Daniels (2009) found that many of the children developed an early awareness and concern for "issues of justice; concern for the wellbeing of others; questions of right and wrong, and the relativism of these concepts; questioning death and the possibility of life beyond; and interest in philosophy and social issues" (p. 141). These interests impacted upon the relationships the gifted child held with the family members and the wider society. Within the early childhood educational domain, the sense of justice or injustice experienced by the gifted can heavily impact upon interpersonal relationships with peers. A gifted child who is exposed to instances of injustice from another child ("they TOOK my toy") may begin to reject possibilities of friendship with that child, and refuse educators' attempts to restore the relationship in favour of their own views and approaches towards what will amend the situation. When the gifted child views instances of injustice in the disputes of others, they may seek to intervene and ensure that an equilibrium of fairness is restored. Lovecky (2009) postulates that asynchrony in moral development and social development can occur when gifted children are not supported within peer environments where their moral development can be understood by their play mates, suggesting that not only does academic acceleration need to be considered but also a peer environment in which other children have the same



moral understanding, so that the gifted child can be supported to enhance their moral abilities.

The development of moral abilities is also important in the development of ethical leaders for the future. Characteristics such as honesty, and reliability which are of paramount importance in moral leadership, overlap with traits typical of gifted children (Jacobsen, 2009). Yet there are problems aligning this altruistic view with the current neoliberal paradigm of education which promotes individuality and personal achievement, encouraging the development of gifted individuals for “frenetic materialistic acquisition and self-aggrandisement” (Ambrose, 2012, p. 101).

Also problematic is the image of the child as a being of future potential capital, which places primacy upon the future actions and achievements of the child rather than their present state. The marketisation of early childhood educational provision promotes investment into early childhood education as investment into future potential human capital, and decisions are made light of, which affect not only the child’s current experiences but the opportunities made available for their future. The future potential human capital of the infant or toddler who is perceived to have accelerated abilities can be calculated to have great value, which could require high levels of economic monetary input in order to realise this ‘potential’. In this way, ‘gifted infants’ are positioned between two debts. These debts are macroeconomic, national and familial, and with multidirectional effects, as children are positioned between the (financial and affective) debts to and of their parents, but also between national and international development promoting their status as the investments into the future (Burman, 2010). This discursive image of the gifted child limits the importance of the gifted child’s current voice; this voice is displaced by the value invested into the child’s future self, subjugating the child in veneration of the adult they will become.

Within *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996) the social development of the child is considered as a part of the child’s overall holistic development. The child is considered as an element within the wider world of relationships, where “children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things” (p. 43). A consideration of the social and relational development being promoted within the curriculum, is integral to early childhood pedagogy. Early childhood education, which promotes moral development through an understanding of how social relationships can impact (both negatively and positively), can prove to be influential in the establishment of moral leadership in gifted children.

Social and relationship development for gifted children is highly influenced by others’ perceptions of the gifted child. If a child is to be considered gifted at a young age (the issues of this identification due to the general asynchrony of children’s development have been outlined earlier), the ascription of the term gifted can alter interactions with the gifted child in positive or negative ways. Externally expected perfectionism “can seriously interfere with interpersonal relationships, the view the gifted students have of their own world, and, certainly, how other people view them” (Clark, 2008, p. 132). When gifted children are viewed to be capable of an intangible potential, (notwithstanding the views of potential promoted within the neoliberal discourse) mapping out this potential can be tricky and frustrating for the educator and child.



Additionally, these perceptions are often constructed through the varying discourses surrounding giftedness and the development of the child. A developmental lens can be implied within the viewing of a child's potential. In addition to the problematics of the consideration of the potential of the child in relation to a neoliberal discourse, these normalised perceptions of children are a "familiar discourse about the very young child – one that looks at children becoming, incomplete and lacking in terms of child development" (Duncan, 2005, p. 5). These discourses of childhood, originating from developmental psychology (for example - Piaget, 1952), construct conceptualisations of the young child that compartmentalise their abilities and normalise their behaviours to fit (or be lacking) within a general model for development. These discourses impact upon the practices of the early childhood teacher by attempting to predict the behaviour of the child, denoting what the teacher should expect from the child, and prescribing how the teacher should then interact with the child (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). But it is between dominant discourses surrounding children and dominant discourses surrounding giftedness where the gifted child is located. The asynchrony of gifted children's development impacts upon their social relationships with others who employ developmental discourses, as their development is not matching normative developmental trajectories. However, it is important to note at this juncture that, without normative discourses, there would also be no scope for giftedness, as the definitions of giftedness are predominately reliant upon the consideration of abilities outside a normative scale of development (Delaune, 2015).

### ***Recommendations for pedagogical practice***

While there are arguments regarding the lack of evidence on how emotions affect gifted children, there are certain steps an educator can take in order to ensure that gifted children are not marginalised for expression of emotional intensities. As claimed earlier within this article, the educator can play a tremendous role in aiding gifted children to build positive relationships with children within the early learning setting. Educators can take the lead by simply being there for gifted children, calm and steady, when emotional outbursts occur. Whatever the context of the emotional outburst, however meagre it may appear to the adults or other children in the room, it is very real to the child it is happening to. Bridging the gap between the gifted child who is undergoing an emotional outburst, and others who may not get it, is crucial. Providing rich language to aid their understanding of the nuances in their emotions will aid the gifted child's ability to express themselves and maintain relationships with others as they describe how they are feeling. Using words beyond happy, sad, angry, and including words such as ecstatic, desolate and frustrated (and more) in the right contexts will provide the linguistic paintbrushes to illustrate for the world the emotive colours these children feel but cannot express. Ensuring they are heard and not compartmentalised as the whiny child will set the tone for other children's behaviour as well. All of these strategies will aid the gifted child's development of emotional regulation.

Daniels and Piechowski (2009a) asserted that for gifted children, "life is experienced in a manner that is deeper, more vivid, and more acutely sensed" (p. 9). Awareness of these sensory sensitivities can aid teacher's understanding of gifted children's responses to particular situations. If a child is withdrawn from a noisy music session, perhaps they have a sensitivity to the noise. Ensure there is



a quiet spot for them to retreat and feel safe. If they are hyper responsive to the noise, perhaps they are also sensitive, but respond with intensity. It might be helpful to bring the level of the play down to a quieter level.

While these recommendations for pedagogical practice appear somewhat simple, there is the necessity to draw attention to one of the main issues within the article in order to problematise this simplicity. It must be considered, whether in promoting a perception of the gifted child as sensitive and vulnerable, we are just looking for the condition or actually seeing the child. In every step that is taken by the educator with the gifted child in the early learning setting, there is the necessity to ensure that the whole child is the primary consideration. Not fragmenting their giftedness, not isolating their emotional sensitivity. If we assume their sensitivity and correlate this with a vulnerability, the agency of the child is displaced. Overexcitability and sensitivity can be a detriment or an asset, but arguably this is set by the tone of the milieu. Best practice with gifted children is to celebrate their expressions, accept this as a part of who they are, and aid them to develop a sense of themselves as a valued member of the community.

## **Conclusion**

Given the disparate and fractious theoretical field (Ambrose, Sternberg, & Sriraman, 2012), much less the problematics of how these philosophies are transmuted into educational practice (Borland, 2003a), early childhood teachers could be forgiven for seeking to disengage from discourses of giftedness within their pedagogy (Delaune, 2015), and employ developmental discourses to make sense of the emotive stage of early childhood. It can be challenging to engage in understanding emotional development and giftedness when the experts in the field cannot agree themselves, or promote theories which appear to have little evidential substantiation. More broadly, there are challenges to the comprehension of giftedness per se as an expression of ability, or the potential for ability (Sternberg, 2004; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005), stymying early childhood teachers' consideration of giftedness as potential ability or current talent expression.

However, while there are children who demonstrate exceptionality in ways that are easily intelligible as expressed forms of giftedness or talent in a particular (or multiple) domains, there are many more children who may not demonstrate this in ways that are easily grasped by teachers within the early childhood environment. Consequently, while the current theories and understandings of gifted children's emotional, social and relationship development within early childhood may not be exhaustive of all the potential possibilities of how these forms of development can be expressed in children, it is the best road map we have to use at present, and often this serves better than no road map at all. But arguably there is potential in investigating other forms of mapping the gifted child in early childhood. In consideration of the pedagogical approach to the gifted child's emotional, social and relationship development, given the conflicting views and reduced research to support some claims, the best advice to educators is to ensure that pedagogical practice is effectively differentiated to ensure that all children's differing interests are being met, and their abilities extended.

The purpose of this paper was to elucidate what is currently understood about the emotional, social and relationship needs of very young gifted children. At some





times, these understandings are vindicated, however there is much room for problematising the notion of giftedness that is promoted within literature from Aotearoa/New Zealand and internationally. Therefore, it is not the aim of this article to proselytise the giftedness cause but rather to strive to make sense of how children within early childhood settings can be supported or marginalised when giftedness is considered. A long standing writer within the field of gifted education, James H. Borland, writes that the concept of the gifted child is “an entity whose ‘reality...at best...[can] not be know[n] and at worst...[does] not exist at all” (Borland, 2003b, p. 106). Regardless of the actuality of giftedness, children’s individual emotional, social and relational experiences deserve to be catered to in specific ways that will enable them to not only make progress but to relish their educational experiences and to develop strategies with which they can acquire the abilities to develop interpersonal relationships that will benefit them within the early childhood domain and over the course of their lives.

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